



novacon
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NOVACON 25 SPECIAL

OVERLOAD

featuring the work of:

Brian W Aldiss,

Iain Banks,

Harry Harrison

and Bob Shaw.

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Guests of Honour

BRIAN W ALDISS

HARRY HARRISON

BOB SHAW

Special Guest

Iain M Banks

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Compulsory Holidays For All by Brian Aldiss

The Implantation Centre was the last word in architectural magnificence and politically correct thinking. Every criminal fortunate enough to enter the portals of the IC was met immediately by decent, concerned professionals. These professionals thoroughly understood the criminal's case before sending him or her forward to the operating theatre for tag implantation.

Few professionals at the Centre were more decent or concerned than Pamela Lyons. She regarded Jock Patel with compassion as the computer at her elbow recited details of Jock's criminal record.

"... three wolverine shortline jackets stolen, 12th March... six rexite tucker-trousers, 13th April... electronic grand piano, 8th May..."

Pamela Lyons was ninety-two. Thanks to Plus-Aevum, the anti-ageing food, she looked a mere thirty-one, a slender birdlike lady with big eyes. She said, "So you have been in quite a lot of trouble, Jock. I think we can help."

"It was just mischief," Jock said. He was a thin and woebegone man, with a drooping moustache which seemed built for sorrow. "I'm known to be mischievous. Any mischief.... Just for laughs."

"Your misplaced sense of humour has landed you in trouble, I fear, Jock. That's why we are going to give you an implant." She turned to the computer, "Mack, dear, tell Jock about the tag."

The computer immediately produced graphs, figures, snatches of video. It made punishment seem like entertainment. A smart tag no bigger than an obsolete postage stamp would be surgically implanted in Jock's skull, near the cerebellum. It would transmit a signal whenever Jock left his home. His whereabouts would always be known at the Centre. Any attempt to escape house arrest would be reported to the police.

"I don't like -," Jock said. But Lyons had pressed a hypodermic pad to his arm and he was out.

When he woke, he was being wheeled from the operating room. Smiling and concerned, Lyons showed him to the door.

She presented him with a placard. "This works on Transport. It is programmed to allow you home to Oxford and nowhere else. Good-bye, Jock. Best of luck."

"Jeez," he said.

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Jock caught a bus. Private cars had been banned. Public transport was free. The bus was full. Most passengers accepted a Buzz as they entered and slumped in their seats, smiling. The bus tonned along traffic-free routes.

Within thirty-five minutes, the vehicle took the Oxford tunnel. It roared downhill to the underground city. With the failure of the ozone layer, many cities were following Oxford's example and going underground. By drilling earth's crust, heat pumps provided low-cost electricity for power and aircond. The bus slowed for the airlock and then they were in broad well-lit streets with well-proportioned buildings rising over twelve storeys to the plastoid dome overhead.

Jock Patel alighted. His skull itched near the cerebellum.

He walked the short distance to The Leys, and the apartment he called home. The place was a shambles. His mother, Clara Montego, had recently given birth again. As a consequence, Jock's father, Paddy Patel, had been forced by government regulations to take three months paternal leave. He was raging about this when Jock entered.

"Just when I was due for promotion," Paddy growled - not for the first time. He worked at the Oxford sewage plant. All city sewage was pumped up to the surface and processed into mudcakes, which sold to connoisseurs in the East.

"Stop moaning and get from under my feet," Clara said.

Jock was older than both his parents.

He slightly resented the fact that they had never registered him for Plus-Aevum. He shouted moodily to the coffee-pot to get boiling.

"Oh, you're back," the pot said. It was programmed to identify family voices, and become self-activated. It served up a mug of steaming cackoff, the genetically adapted caffeine substitute. Jock drank it with noisy enjoyment.

"I been tagged," he told his father.

"We've all got problems," Paddy said.

"Lots of problems," cried Elvis, their pet parrot. The Patels lived over a parrot shop. "Pretty problems, pretty problems."

"Don't start complaining again," Clara warned the men. She put the baby in the infanteria, and sat smiling a vague smile as she watched the child being washed and gently spin-dried.

Jock and Paddy got on well together. It had been Paddy who introduced his son to shop-lifting. At that time, Paddy Patel was working as a registered Council Child Molester, a short-lived programme designed to teach small kids to be wary of strangers.

Between them, they now came up with an idea by which Paddy could pass his three

months compulsory idleness in comfort, at the same time avoiding annoying Clara, who just wanted to be alone with her baby and Extra-C, "a slug of the drug that makes you glug...".

In an altruistic move to spread some of the wealth of the West among the underprivileged regions of the world, the European parliament had enacted a law forcing all citizens to take a paid month's holiday beyond fortified European perimeters.

"It's easy," Jock said, after a long discussion. "You gotta take three months off. Also you gotta take a foreign holiday and eat foreign muck. Do the holiday now - get it over with and escape from here. Easy-peasy."

"Easy-peasy," cried Elvis. Parrots in the shop below, hearing his voice through the aircond, took up the cry: "Easy-peasy, easy-peasy!"

"Easy-pweasy," squawked the baby, in imitation. At six weeks, she was beginning to talk, thanks to genetic engineering. She would be at Remedial by two and at work on quantalputers by four. The benefits of science were still improving the human race. There would be time for education when Babs was nineteen and good and ready for it.

"You're on," said Paddy, above the racket and ordered the phone to log his M.P.

The M.P. came up on the screen, looking consumer-friendly. Every citizen had a Master Parent, actually a folder in a computer network stretching from Falmouth to Lossiemouth, and many a mouth between. Paddy's M.P. knew everything about him, and was codenamed FRIDO.

"Yes, you can take your compulsory holiday now. It falls within the financial year 2006."

FRIDO went on to explain some of the regulations governing travel outside the European perimeter. He spoke in English, translating from Bruspeak, the politically correct language which contained proportionately equal numbers of words from each of the twenty Euronations.... Paddy was trying to learn it, without much success; the vocabulary contributions from Albania and the Faroes had him stumped.

"So where I got to go this year, FRIDO?" he asked.

FRIDO said he would get back to Paddy in microseconds. As he explained, holiday destinations were distributed stochastically.

"Who's he when he's at home?"

"Random distribution having finite variance."

"Why can't you say so then? Meaning they'll send me anywhere, like last year."

"Exactly. You went to the Falklands then, 30th February to 1st April."

"Don't remind me."

Paddy and Jock sat looking at each other across the kitchen table. Paddy yelled to the pot for more cackoff.

"Got to get rid of this tag," Jock said, scratching the back of his head. "Can't call your skull your own with this thing bugging you."

"No problem. There's a forger here in the Leys," his father said. "Name of Jobbins. Electronics whizz. He owes me."

FRIDO called back. The lottery announced Paddy Patel had to spend his extra-EU holiday in Kazakhstan.

"Where the flaming old goolagong is Kazakh-whatsit?"

"Your details coming through immediately," said FRIDO, closing down. "In Brusspeak, '*Bueno yolculuk*'. In English, '*Bon voyage*'."

The new paperwork for the compulsory holiday stuttered through the e-orifice.

The Patel family spent some while going spare. Clara complained about the government. Paddy contradicted, saying they owed everything to it. How could Oxford have been built underground, in safety and comfort, without vast subsidies from the EU government? - So they had had to leave the old university outside, so what? She didn't know what she was talking about, he said.

"Po-liteness! Just remember I'm not your wife. The license ran out last May." She subsided into her Extra-C doze.

Their terminal issued Paddy with all the plastic he would need on his holiday. Also a map showing whereabouts in Central Asia Kazakhstan was. He would be staying at the Ocean Hotel in Aralsk. He could take a companion with him, free of charge. He had to spend at least twenty ecus per day locally.

"I got no ecus, only Oxford coupons and they're non-negotirabble I need Jobbins."

"I'm staying put," Clara murmured.

"I'll come with you," Jock said, looking up from the new paperwork. "Says here you get a camel ride and a swim in the Aral Sea. Just need to get this tag out of my nutcase."

Paddy winked. "Come with me."

Long ago, back in the twentieth century, experts had looked at the question of how science and technology could concentrate on areas of development likely to yield the greatest economic and social benefit. When their findings were implemented, a vast change had come over the highly developed western world. People now lived longer, were happier, and enjoyed electronic sensory stimulation in their own home.

As a result, sex in the old sense had become old-fashioned, something indulged in mainly by the over-eighties.

It was with a certain excitement that Paddy Patel and his son turned up at the Oxford coach station. Two miles underground, the station was a model of cleanliness, despite being known as a high-crime area. Mobile shops crawled along the aiseways, selling Medtype food, oils, squids, olives, etc, and accepting only electronic credits in payment.

Among the sinister characters hanging about - some of whom Paddy recognised - were members of UpU, the Under-Population Unit, known to fire pellets of norgestomet, a cattle contraceptive, into young women, to stop them reproducing. Neither Patel fancied being caught in cross-fire. They bundled quickly aboard a shuttle which would take them to the nearest W-road station.

The great W-road station for England was in Kent. Here their DNA identification was checked. A hostess ushered them aboard the eight-story vehicle.

Pamela Lyons, sprightly ninety-two year old, was attending a meeting at the Implantation Centre. This afternoon, she forgot about her 'patients' (as she thought of them) to listen to future developments.

The Director was speaking of health benefits. "At present, fifty percent of food products reach the consumer through TV home shopping. This is gradually obviating the need for our inhuman supermarkets. The percentage of consumers who ordered pre-prepared meals is also rising. That trend must be encouraged. We want to see a nation where crude old methods of cooking in the home - with all its dangers to health - is eliminated."

Lyons found herself moved to rise and speak. "The optimism of our Director must be supported by better in-care provisions in our reformatories. The phasing-out of prisons is a sound step. But I will remind you that in New Dartmoor, only 35 percent of foods served are organic, and meat forms too large a part of the dietary there. The prisoners complain about that. We have genetic screening here in the Centre, detecting predisposition to major illness. I would like more acceptance from the general public of the understanding that criminality is a form of disease - which can be cured by genetic engineering.

"For instance, I have a patient, Jock Patel, not a bad boy, who suffers from kleptomania. He stole a grand piano and is now tabbed. Young Patel is just one case among many where medical manipulation would -"

The afternoon wore on.

Great W-roads had begun to span the world. Jet liners had ceased to tear the stratosphere apart when legislation was passed to curb global warming. Private cars were also banned, except for electrics, limited to within a forty kilometre radius of base. The big quanxies (they were Chinese in origin, from a word meaning circular) had the W-roads to themselves. Ten metres wide by twenty-five high, they moved smoothly along the world highways, stopping only rarely at passenger stations.

Paddy and Jock had berths on Deck Three, near the swimming pool, Economy Class. Their hostess was Imelda, a former TV weathergirl and nude model; she would be their tour guide in Aralsk, Kazakhstan. Imelda had perfect skin, teeth, and manners, which rather put Paddy off.

The wonderful W-road unwound, through the new Chunnel, across Belgium, and over the flat North European Plain, to Berlinstadt, where more passengers embarked. On then, countries flickering beyond the ports, day and night fading, as the passengers swooned under many sensory delights, until Volgograd.

Volgograd was the terminus for W-roads West, a complex junction where the EU ended and W-roads East carried traffic into the dry worlds of CEAST, the Central East Asian Treaty countries. Here, IDs giving details of credit status and crime ratings were read by electronic detectors. Anyone with tag implants was turned off the vehicle.

"Rrruffgh, could be good...", said Jock, peering out of the window at desiccated sand, as he roused from a long detailed dream about a woman with detachable private parts.

Paddy and Jock were quite excited when the quanzy barrelled through the fortified perimeter into West Kazakhstan. Through this enormous desert country, only one W-road had as yet been built. Eventually, it would loop across the Himalayas, bifurcating to reach Peking and the cities of the Pacrim. CEAST was expected to be the great business centre of the twenty-second century. Like Brazil.

They arrived at the Aralsk station at six a.m. Dawn over minarets, dawn on camelshaws. An electric trolley took the Patels to the Ocean hotel. Imelda escorted them and other passengers.

"Unfortunately," she said, "the Aral Sea dried up. It is now being reconstituted, but its shores are sixty kilometres from our hotel."

"I bet she's an android," Jock said, as he and his father settled into their small room. For breakfast, spagbol was brought in. They could tell conditions would be primitive. Somehow they had to serve out a whole month's holiday; it was like a

life sentence. Fortunately, a Virtual Reality theatre operated on the ground floor, where they could meet characters from the Arabian Nights.

"How's your skull?" Paddy asked.

Jock laughed. "Can't feel a thing. Good forger, Jobbins. Blanked my tab, inserted a duplicate in Elvis, without interrupting the signal..."

"There's always a way, son."

At the Implantation Centre, nifty ninety-two year old Pamela Lyons was glad when the conference closed. It had been a useful two-day event, but she had to return to her patients.

The face on her monitor was silently mouthing when she entered her office.

"Problem on patient M/14679," it said, when she asked it to speak up. "That's Jock Patel."

"What's the matter with him?"

"His voice is strange," said the computer. "He keeps repeating silly phrases. Sounds like madness - a pretty prevalent human condition."

"Let's hear, then, Mack."

The computer e-ed through to the Patel apartment.

Lyons listened in shock.

All she heard was "Who's a pretty boy, then? Who wants a grand piano? Pretty piano, pretty polly."

Decent concerned professional that she was, she told herself, Criminality is definitely a form of disease. We're doing something wrong. "Let's hope the future will be better", she muttered.

The computer said, "Some hopes!"



New by Iain Banks

Quiet as snow from a windless sky
Slow as lichen on a scoured stone spreading
By year and through decades
By century and for histories
Minute blossoms prick back wastes
Like bright bubbles
On a nightfall of dark ocean.

Their lives counted in forgotten cities
By millennia and jungles long submerged
Their immensity measured
In splintered parings of degrees,
A detonation of far stars froths up
And scatters from each seeded globe
Their offspring
Like pollen on the wind.

Foreword by Harry Harrison

Many, many years ago, when the world was young, I was editing a series of anthologies title NOVA. They were quite nice books and contained only original stories. An old friend of mind that I have known since his fannish days was one Harlan Ellison. He submitted a story titled "A Boy and His Dog". I wasn't charmed by it so I bounced it. Harlan, who rather liked this story, was most hurt by my rejection. His story was bounced by another market and then sold to a third. Harlan eventually did very well with the story and I think a film was made of it.

Some years later I was walking with my dog when a title flashed before my eyes. "A Dog and His Boy". But was there a plot behind the title? There was. I wrote the story - then thought of Harlan. I had never submitted to him in his role as an editor. But I really had to give him first look for the above reasons.

He looked and he bought and he sent me a check. The story was to be included in an anthology titled LAST DANGEROUS VISIONS. The rest, he sighed, is history.

It is now even more years later and we are waiting impatiently for his anthology. To give you a taste of its contents and whet your appetite, so you rush out and buy it on publication day, here is the story. Harlan has requested me not to sell this story since he wants it to appear in his anthology first. But I am not selling it. I am letting our Novacon 25 use it free, gratis to honor this important occasion. I hope you enjoy it.

And Harlan, old friend, if this passes before your eyes please understand you still have the publishing rights. Good luck.

A Dog and His Boy by Harry Harrison

"Here boy," the dog called out. Panting loudly the boy ran over to him to have his head patted.

"You're a good boy," the dog said. "A very good boy."

Of course the dog was not quite an ordinary dog, this must be made very clear. But, then again, neither was the boy an ordinary boy. The Earth was the same, in fact it was a better Earth than it had been for centuries. At night the stars in the sky were still the same, although they twinkled much more crisply through the clear atmosphere, and the same old Moon turned its eternally scarred face toward the planet below. However it was not night now, but early morning, the sharp clear dry frosty morning that can only be found high on the plateau of Mexico in the autumn of the year when the air is a different substance from the ordinary. It bites the

[Copyright 1995 by Harry Harrison]

throat and hurts and heals at the same time. A thin mist was rising from the stream that ran through the garden, obscuring the bright flowers beyond as through a veil of silk. Two crows flapped by high above, calling out hoarsely, the rising sun painting highlights on their ebon feathers, while in the distance it washed the peak of the snow covered volcano of Popocatepetl with a rosy light. It was a fine time and a fine place to be alive in and both the dog and his boy were enjoying themselves hugely.

They had been playing a simple and foolish game that they both loved, a very energetic one because the air at dawn when they had emerged from the house had been much colder. The boy ran first into the ornamental garden, leaping the flower beds and low hedges, swinging from a tree branch to an ornamental seat and even wading, shivering so hard his teeth had chattered together, through a shallow pond of frightened carp. Then after yawning widely and scratching his ribs with the thick claws of his hind foot, the dog had padded forth on the trail, sniffing and snorting loudly to catch the scent. Once he had found it he had burst forth reflexively with the baying howl of a hound on a trail, a sound that sent fear thudding through the hearts of the deer in the forest who heard it, but only made the boy smile and run faster.

It had been a merry chase and a long one, for the boy was becoming proficient at the game and knew a dozen different ways to disguise his trail. The dog liked this for it made the hunt so much more interesting and jolly. There could be but one ending of course, there was no quarry born that could escape *this* dog, and in due time the dog stood at the base of a thick oak and bayed with victory. The leaves rustled and the boy swung from a bough and dropped to the ground. Breathing heavily in happy silence they had returned to the house and to their breakfast. A cold haunch of venison was held under a great paw, fang-torn and vanished quickly. The boy watched in appreciation of the great appetite but himself had only some fruit and a wedge of fresh cheese, for he rarely ate meat. While they dined the sun rose, the mists cleared, another beautiful day had begun.

"Here, boy," the dog said. "Scratch me right back there between the shoulder blades, you know the spot where I can't reach...ahhh, yes; that's it, that is it indeed."

"There's something here," the boy peered close, scowling. "Yes, a flea, I thought so. Have you been bathing with the flea soap the way the vet ordered?"

"Maybe, I don't know, perhaps, I forget. Anyway, it stinks something awful. You can't smell it, but to a dog it has a smell that is particularly offensive."

"The vet will be angry."

"I am not perturbed." When the dog yawned it could be seen that his fangs were each longer than the boy's hands. It would take a good deal to perturb him.

"I am going away for the day, Rover," the dog said. The boy's name was Rover and the dog only used it when issuing orders or saying something that was not too nice. "Sisserex is in charge of the house while I am away and you are to obey him, do you hear?"

"Yes, Master," the boy said, scowling darkly. The dog's name was of course Master; all dogs were named Master.

"And don't pout, it makes you look ugly. The last time I was away there was a little matter of the chandelier and I believe Sisserex told you about it..."

"Yes, Master, I will obey." Then the boy brightened, for he could not remain unhappy for too long. "But, ohh, ohh what a lovely sound it made when it fell down...krrrrr-AASH!"

They both laughed loud and long at this, the dog howling with laughter. He lifted a great paw clumsily and patted the boy's head. He could not stay angry at him, even when he was a mischief and got into trouble.

"Will you be gone long?" the boy asked, worrying a bit of apple skin from between his teeth with a fingernail.

"Just for the day. With a little luck I'll be home for dinner. The Master of Cuernavaca has a bitch in heat, a lovely black and white one, I've seen her, and he has invited me over."

"What for?" the boy asked, eyes wide and round.

"May you never know," the dog answered and the shadow of some strong emotion passed across him for he twitched his lips back from his teeth in a frightening grimace. The boy looked on in wonderment as the dog shook himself and ran a thick black tongue over his lips until they smoothed and relaxed.



"Do you know how long you have been with me?" the dog asked, eager to change the subject.

"Years and years. I forget."

"How high can you count?"

"Up to a hundred - and without using my fingers or toes."

"Bright boy! Then tell me quickly what is ten and ten and ten and five?"

"Wait, you must give me some time." He started to look at his fingers and they both laughed as he put his hands behind his back. "I can do it without looking. It is...ten and ten...it is THIRTY-FIVE!"

"That is absolutely right. Take a piece of candy for that answer, take *two* pieces."

The boy snatched them from the dish; he never took them unless he was told, and his cheek bulged and his jaw worked with pleasure.

"Yes, thirty-five years. And good years too. You are the best boy I have ever known, the best boy I have ever had."

"You have had other boys?"

"Well, perhaps," the dog said evasively, chewing deeply at an imaginary flea on his thigh to hide his expression. "It's hard to remember." His voice was muffled by his fur. "You must remember that a dog's life span is far greater than a boy's. But let us not talk about that now. Call Sisserex here for I have orders for him."

The boy skipped out and the dog ground a few last scraps of meat from the bone and thought about the day. Unless he gave exact orders things never ran smoothly while he was away. Sisserex waddled in slowly, his thick tail cutting S patterns across the floor behind him. For a saurinoid he was intelligent, which was why he headed the household staff, but that was still not saying very much.

"I am going away for the day but I will be back for dinner."

"Yess mässter."

Sisserex nodded as he listened to the instructions, his long jaw bobbing, little yellow teeth peeping out up and down all along its length. While he listened his thin, eight-fingered hands twined and retwined with the effort of memory, the nictating membranes on his eyes flicking with the same effort.

"Do you understand?"

"Yes, ssertainly master."

"Let us hope you do or I'll sink my teeth into your leathery rump until you hiss for mercy."

"Never masster! I remember all!"

"Good. Now call the chauffeur and tell him to bring the car. I leave at once."

It was a grand leave-taking and all the house and garden servants and the boy made the most of it. Willing hands pushed the bulk of the car from the garage and the house servants used little rags to polish the already gleaming crystal and gold of its body. The chauffeur stalked back and forth importantly in front of the vehicle, his hands gloved in heavy driving gloves, his protruding eyes made even larger still by the thick goggles that covered them. Mechanics with oil-stained green skins waddled about testing the tension on the tracks and kicking the tires for pressure. The road from Cuautla to Cuernavaca was not maintained so was very bad in places, washed out and weed-grown, but this great car would crash through easily. .

From the kitchen two of the cooks appeared, trundling a trolley laden with a smoking freshly baked ham, wild pig, peccary, the kind the master loved, placing it in a special compartment in the car in case he should get hungry. There was a bottle of champagne as well, and it was sealed into the dispenser where he could fill his bowl at the press of a paw switch; he was very fond of champagne.

Then soon everything was done that was to be done and they waited, the saurinoids with impassive and unmoving lizardly patience, the boy impatiently tapping his toes, standing on his head, sitting down and then standing again. .

At last the Master appeared! There was a great hissing of breath and a single boyish shout of joy for he looked marvellous indeed. The carriers had worked his coat so it gleamed smoothly and rich. Around his neck he wore his dress collar set with diamonds and a single ruby in front as big as a hen's egg. The door was thrown open and he climbed the ramp and circled twice before lying down comfortably in the silk-cushioned interior. Then the door was closed, the car rumbled away under the powerful drive of the silent atomic engine while everyone cheered and hissed and cheered again until it vanished from sight around a bend.

It was a long and boring day for the boy, for without the dog he did not have very much to do, and what he did do usually got him into trouble. The cooks chased him from the kitchen when, while reaching down a banana from the stalk that hung from the ceiling, he kicked over the pot in which the servants were mixing their noonday meal.

"Spilled it - naughty boy."

"It should be spilled, horrible gog, uggh, I wouldn't eat it!" he called out and easily dodged their clumsy blows, fleeing the kitchen.

The rest of the house was no better. The cleaners hissed at him when he tracked dirt on the clean rug and broke leaves from the potted sugar-cane to chew on. Outside in the garden there was little trouble to get into, but little fun as well. In the end he climbed to the highest point on the roof, which the dog had strictly forbidden him to do, and from there looked at the view down the valley, at the farms and little villages of saurinoids with the dry desert beyond and the mountains beyond that and the sky and everything.

What with one thing and another the day passed, dragged past at times, and the sun mounted to the zenith and dropped to the horizon. Then, when it was shining redly through the rising plumes of the evening cooking fires in the village a cloud of dust could be seen mounting the valley so that the boy shouted with joy and ran to the front door.

There had been showers along the way and mud upon the road: the crystal and gold were splashed and stained. The chauffeur, sitting high in front and exposed to the elements, looked waterlogged and dusty as well and only too happy to stop the engine and pull the tall brake handle back into position. Then the ramp dropped to the ground and the boy ran forward while the dog emerged, growling and surly.

"Sisserex," he snarled. "Run my bath now, make it very hot. It has been a long day and I am tired and dusty and out of sorts. And take this damned collar off, it has been choking me every foot of the way home..."

"I'll do it," the boy said, running forward, but the dog turned away without a word and padded quickly into the house. The boy looked after him with wonderment, he had never seen him in such a foul mood - then was aware of a whimpering noise from inside the car.

Cautiously, he grabbed the sill of the door and pulled himself up with his arms and looked in.

And saw the small boy curled up in the corner and sobbing as though his heart would break.

"What's this? Who are you? What are you doing here?"

This was something really interesting. He rarely saw other boys, just once in awhile when visiting masters brought their boys, but there was never much chance to talk and usually they had a fight over something. But this was a smaller boy, just about the smallest he had ever seen, too small to fight really and almost too small to bully.

"Stand up you," he ordered, "and come out of there at once."

The boy obeyed with reluctance, standing slowly, grubbing his eyes with one fist, a doll clutched tightly in his other hand. He emerged and blinked up, tears still wet on his face.

"Do you have a name, little boy? I am Rover and I am the boy around here."

"They call me... Spot... because of this." He pointed to the black patch of a birthmark on his cheek.

You're a pretty small boy, Spot. How old are you?"

"I don't know. No one ever told me."

"You're pretty dumb as well as small. I'm... thirty-five. That is ten and ten and ten and five."

"How much is ten?" Spot asked, interest supplanting misery and drying his tears for the moment.

"Two hands, like this. And five is one hand. Didn't you know that?"

"No. But it's nice to know. I know one and two."

"You got a lot to learn. Hungry?"

"Yes."

"Come inside. This is my house and I can get food any time."

Spot was hungry and ate greedily - with one hand though, for he never put the doll down. Rover looked at it.

"I have a doll. Somewhere."

"This is mine," Spot said anxiously, clutching it to his chest.

"Don't want your nasty old doll. Where's your Master?"

Spot put out his lower lip and looked around unhappily and finally said, "Don't have one."

It was then that Rover had his first intimation of trouble, a tiny tug at his heart, the smallest little worry.

"Well, don't hang around here. I'm the boy around here."

"Don't like it here," the other sniffled.

"That's good."

He boxed the other boy in the ear to make sure the message got home and looked on with disgust while the stranger bawled lustily with pain.

"With speed, come," a servant said, scuttling into the room greatly agitated. "The Master calls. With anger."

The boy ran happily and plopped down on the rug next to the dog who was hungrily finishing off a large bowl of raw chopped meat.

"Where is the other one?" the dog asked.

"In the kitchen. Eating. He cries too much. Why did you bring him?"

"The Master asks questions, not the boy," he growled deep in his throat, dodging the question, feigning anger. The boy knew it was not real and the little worry of fear grew larger. The dog looked at his face then turned back quickly to the silver bowl and ran his tongue about it after the last flecks of meat.

"Did you ever think about dogs and boys and saurionoids?" he asked.

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Let me tell you about them and you must listen as you have never listened before. This is your world."

"I know that. And your world and..."

"Be quiet. You must listen and not talk until you are given permission to. I mean this is *your* world. The Earth, this planet. My people came here from far away, from out there among the stars, or so it is written. A long time ago, or so it is written. We are called the Hounds of Heaven."

"That's nice."

"Be quiet. No it is not nice. We ruled our world first as beasts and then as beasts with intelligence. At first we ruled through the strength of our jaws but later through the power of our wit. For we are very smart. Far smarter than these crawling green saurionoids. But we had a need of them. Their hands. A paw is good for a few things but a hand can do anything. We bred these hand-carrying brainless creatures for intelligence and did indeed breed enough in so we could utilize them. With hands to apply what our intelligence divined, we were indeed the Hounds of Heaven and bent our world, and other worlds to our will. We like to rule - and we like to fight - and this planet has given us more than enough of both. Now you may ask questions."

The boy sat, wide-eyed with interest. "Questions? I have none. Oh, please tell me more!"

"Don't you hate me yet? I told you we took your world from you."

The boy laughed, loud and clear as a silver chime. "You're making fun of me for I have my world still! Isn't it all around us?"

"But it was *your* world, your people's world. You fought us and died for it and now it belongs to us."

"That's nice. It's a nice world."

"You don't understand, do you?" The dog's eyes were filled with sympathy and compassion - and a great unhappiness. "But you will some day. We did not want to do it and it is written that all of us wanted to leave, to stop the killing, to return home. But we could not. For we knew that someday you would follow us for vengeance and would be stronger. We knew that it would have to be one of us or the other so, in great sorrow, we fought and won and made the world the way you see it today."

"You killed boys?" There were the first touches of understanding.

"Boys and more than boys. We killed...everyone." The fur along the dog's back

was raised now, unknowingly. He spoke defensively. "But there was a certain justice, a certain right in what we did. Your people were devastating this planet, choking, destroying, filth, rape, I could never believe the books, I had to see the tapes for myself. All who died then, would have died eventually in any case. Those who are alive now have a pleasure of life."

"But you killed them," the boy said with a sudden understanding well beyond his years.

"Yes. We did. And you will come to hate us for it like all the others. They'll talk to you and..."

"What others?" He was suddenly cold from head to foot.

The dog turned away so he could not catch his eye - then turned back with resolution, sitting up strong and firm.

"The others of your kind. You are leaving here..."

"NO!"

"Yes. It must be, I cannot help it. I don't want you to go."

"Then I will stay?"

"No. You will go. That is the order. The Master of Cuernevaca knew about it, he is a good friend, that is why he called me there to tell me himself. He knows how close a dog and his boy can be. There will be a new boy here..."

"That one in the kitchen! I will kill him, push him out!"

"Stop, please, sit again while I tell you why you must go and he must stay. Remember my words for many new and exciting things will be happening to you soon and you will forget your dog. You will be happy to have left him, will wonder how you put up with all the years at his house."

"Never!"

The dog sighed. "Unhappily, you will. You will finally be allowed to grow up and will find many other things to interest you."

"What is growing up?"

"You will find out soon enough and will know then what it is impossible to tell you now. They say that you are of good gene stock and old males have died and they need new ones. You have been chosen. Some day you will look upon it as an honour. You will have women and father children and plot with the other males to escape from the island and regain your world and kill all of the dogs and..."

"I do not understand what you are saying and I am frightened."

"You are a good boy, a very good boy," the dog said, and clumsily patted his head. "The best boy I have ever known. But you will grow up and will discover for yourself that as great as is the love of a dog and his boy there is something that is even greater. So, come now, let us walk in the garden before it is dark and you will throw the stick and I will chase it. Just one last time."

Debriefing by Iain Banks

On a plane of fatted dust I stood
A beast alone on others backs;
A shadow over all the accidental past.

Deep in softness,
Surrounded and surmounting,
The wind came like a flaw,
Wrapped memories and dreams
Around my legs,
And carried on.

- From dark sky come big ship;
Fire and wind, expectable.
Hoist your weapons, tramp lads,
Lids closed over the false wind,
Enter it.

- Wipe them from your eyes,
Spit them from your teeth,
Snort them, prize them;
Turn young backs
On a winter's desolation
And go through pastel shades
and filtered air
To shower rec. soc. and sleep,

And so ignore
(As viral, phallic, a shaft of fire we ride
From this wrung cell away)
The wilderness inside.

Iain Banks



An Introduction by Bob Shaw

The following short story is - for me, anyway - quite an historical document. I first tried my hand at writing sf way back in 1954, when I was a mere stripling. The first six stories I wrote sold immediately to magazines like NEBULA and AUTHENTIC. That gave me an inflated idea of my talent and abilities, and it was with an air of cool confidence that I penned my seventh story, the one you are - I hope - about to read. "The Mercenary Mirage", however was rejected by all the British editors of the day. Then aged 24, I was touchy, proud and given to grandiose moods in which I thought I could punish the world by withdrawing from it. Accordingly, when my last masterpiece failed to be appreciated, I quit writing and even sold my typewriter.

More than ten years later, when I had grown up somewhat, I returned to the fold and since then have published many novels and short stories. But human nature is a strange thing. One of my proudest boasts as a professional writer has always been that I published 100% of my output. The statement was true, but not exactly true - because of the damned "Mercenary Mirage". Even the title seemed to be accusatory.

Over the ensuing decades I tried to make myself forget about the story and I had almost succeeded, when a few years ago an envelope with a Californian postmark plopped through my letterbox. I opened it and discovered a yellowed original manuscript of "Mirage"! There was no accompanying letter, but the sight of those old quarto sheets triggered a host of neurones in my brain and memories came flooding back.

I recalled that my friend, Forest J Ackerman, had been dabbling in the literary agency business back in the mid 1950s and that I had sent him the story in the hope that it would be a great success in the USA, thereby teaching the cloddish British editors a lesson. That dream failed to come true and eventually I had completely forgotten it. Obviously, 35 years later, Forry had been rationalising his world-famous collection of SF memorabilia, had found the manuscript and instead of dumping it - as most people would have done - had mailed the story back to me.

Therefore by courtesy of Forry Ackerman, here it is....

The Mercenary Mirage by Bob Shaw

For over three hours Phenix had been thinking, with an intense nostalgic yearning, of the office job he had thrown up in the damp and misty north of England. He longed for the clammy fog that had often escorted him right to the office door and the cold rain that would beat against the windows and sometimes even managed to find its way through the roof onto furniture and workers alike. He wished

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desperately for the sound of frantically gurgling downpipes and the smell of rubber boots drying against the radiators. He remembered wistfully the wags of the department ruining Christmas carols with their corny harmonising on a grey, rain-drenched mid-summers day. Phenix shifted the haversack to a slightly less uncomfortable spot on his sweating back and swore bitterly at the weight of money it contained. Who could have guessed that six thousand four hundred and thirty-seven pounds, in singles, fives and tens, would be such a fantastic weight? Slowly he scrutinised the baking desert with red rimmed eyes in the hope that he would see some sign of the track to Pells that he had wandered off during the night. There was no trace of life within the horizon to horizon stretch of sand dunes. Namqualand's Koa Valley was probably one of the least populated spots in the world - definitely a very bad place to get lost. The rather temperamental old Ford had chosen to run a big end about forty-five miles out from Steinkopf leaving Phenix trembling with anger and sudden panic. It was so important for him to reach Nakop quickly and catch a train south to Port Elizabeth. In other circumstances Phenix would have spent the night in the car and attempted to walk the forty odd miles to Pella at dawn. But this time he had been in such an agony of impatience that he had set out in the dark.

The nights in that part of South West Africa are often as hot as the days and before Phenix had covered ten miles he was sick and dizzy with the heat. Somehow he had kept on going and when the sun came up there was no sign of the bumpy, pot holed track he had been following. He could have retraced his steps but for the sack full of money urging him to go on. Now Phenix was faced with the unpleasant realisation that, unless something happened, he would soon be dead.

The desert was very lonely and quiet - just sterile sand and the achingly bright sky, empty except for a lone secretary bird swinging in search of basking snakes. Behind him his footprints were an untidy seam in the motionless yellow billows.

For another four hours he plodded on trying to divert his mind from the heat by looking for the diamonds that were said to be scattered throughout the Koa. Naturally he found none and when he stopped again to survey the horizons he was mildly surprised to see that the line he had traced across the dunes curved and meandered like a giant encephalographic scrawl. Phenix decided to press on but his body, spurred on by the sudden cessation of movement, decided to rebel. His knees slowly gave way then the aching back muscles relaxed, gently depositing Phenix face-downwards in the sand.

"Got to get up", he told himself reproachfully, then decided that maybe next week would be soon enough. He was lying like that, cursing himself for being too flustered to bring enough water and dreaming of clear draughts of iced lager, when somebody whistled at him. It was a cheeky, imperative, head-turning sort of a whistle.

"Sunstroke next" Phenix muttered, toying with a new idea. Supposing he managed to weep? He might be able to hold his face at such an angle that a few tears would trickle into his mouth, but then were not tears supposed to be...?

"Hey you! Sphinx! Look over here!"

The part of his mind that still functioned properly was quivering with shock when Phenix lifted his face from its comfortable nest in the sand. About thirty feet away, where there had been nothing but desert a moment before, stood a gaily red and white striped stall, the shelves of which were lined with brightly labelled bottles. Dazedly he noticed the crisp canvas sun awning, the Coca Cola ads and the pink cheeked youth in white cap and jacket who stood behind the counter. Wafting across the parched sand there came the faint scent of orangeade.

The same segment of his mind that had borne the brunt of the discovery immediately went into top gear on likely and then unlikely explanations. Most likely - Sunstroke deliriums, although the dry Namqualand heat was not at all conducive to that particular ailment. Second likeliest - he had died. If he was about to receive an ice-cold drink he was in heaven and if the bottles were empty... well, it couldn't get much hotter anyway.

Deciding on the first theory, Phenix decided to ignore the apparition. Then he carried the thought a logical step further. If he could imagine a soft drink stand in such perfect detail he would be able to create all the sensations accompanying the actual imbibing of the drinks equally well. If he was really lying in a coma there was no reason why he shouldn't enjoy himself.

Slowly and painfully Phenix rose to his feet and staggered to the glass topped counter. Reaching it



he became aware that the stand was real. The edges burrowed naturally into the sand and the counter didn't vanish when he put his hand on it.

The efficient looking youth in charge drummed his carefully manicured fingers and exhaled impatiently.

"What'll it be mister?" he asked rather sharply apparently resenting Phenix's opened-mouth inspection.

"Anything," replied Phenix, forcing his mouth to operate. "Anything at all. A large cold drink - it doesn't matter what."

"Coming up," replied the other. He took a glass from below the counter, dropped a blob of ice cream into it and topped it up with foaming orange juice. When that was done he inserted a long plastic spoon and two bright red straws and set it before Phenix.

Phenix whimpered faintly and reached for the glass. Before his fingers closed on it, the youth, moving with calm speed, snatched it away. Phenix suppressed an impulse to dive across the counter.

"What the...? Why the...?" he gasped huskily. "What's wrong?"

The young man fixed him with a cold stare. "You forgot to pay," he pointed out. "I like to be paid first."

"How much is it then?" Phenix grumbled.

The attendant permitted the ghost of a smile to flit across his immaturely perfect features.

"All the drinks are the same price," he said. "This will cost you six thousand four hundred and thirty-seven pounds."

"Good God!" Phenix whispered strickenly, instinctively clutching the haversack on his back. He didn't know whether he was more astounded at the magnitude of the sum or the fact that it was the exact amount that the sack contained. Right down to the last greasy note.

"What did you say?" he finally managed, dully.

"Six thousand four hundred and thirty-seven pounds." the attendant repeated patiently. "No charge for the straws."

The time had come, Phenix decided, to sit down and think. He walked back a dozen paces, set the sack down and sat on it, staring at the brightly gleaming stall. The attendant, unperturbed, leaned on the counter and stared back.

The first item was how the stall got there so suddenly. That was obviously a dead end - nobody could think a thing like that out. Next thing was the extremely extortionate tariff. That too was hopeless - that and the coincidence in the amounts

involved. In fact, out of the whole episode there was only one thing that stood out in absolute clarity - even though he was dying of thirst he was not going to hand over his bag of money for a shilling drink. It was almost a year since Phenix had drifted up along the coast from Cape Town. He had been flat broke when he wandered into the ghost town of Concordia, an empty husk of a place, whose life had been snuffed out in the copper slump of 1920. There he had met old Winston Johnson a descendant of one of the earliest Voortrekkers, who, although independently rich, spent his time in the desert around Steinkopf running his plant exporting business. The ageing botanist had wanted somebody to do the legwork involved in collecting the strange desert plants, the "succulents" and the little aloes that so much resembled the pebbles among which they grew.

When Phenix went to work for Johnson he had been a tolerably honest man, but his employer's money habits had cured him of that. It was six years since he had bothered to drive to the bank and deposit the takings of his fairly prosperous business. When Johnson had driven over to Bogenfels for a week's visit to an ailing friend Phenix realised how much he needed a change of air too.

On the night that Johnson had set out Phenix opened the ancient safe and collected all the ready cash that was there. It had been easy to do it unobserved and if the Ford hadn't broken down Phenix would have been almost into Nakop on his way south. Anyway, no matter what happened, he intended to keep the money that had cost him so much worry and hardship.

The yearning for liquid that was making itself so devastatingly apparent, especially in his mouth and throat, became unbearable. Phenix walked back to the stand.

"What's your name?" he said conversationally.

"Joe," the attendant replied patiently.

"How did you do that materialising trick a while back?" Phenix asked hopefully, watching his finger make oily patterns on the glass top. There was a faint chance that he would get a straight and enlightening answer but when he looked up there was an amused and scornful look in Joe's eyes. Joe didn't even bother to speak.

"I thought not," said Phenix. "No harm in a try. Are you still being awkward about the price of one of your fruit drinks?"

"You'll never reach Pella without one," Joe replied reasonably. "I'm selling you your life!"

"That's my point," snarled Phenix. "My own property!" He shot his arm across the counter with all the speed his weary muscles could produce and managed to claw his fingers into Joe's throat. A startled light flickered in Joe's eyes for a moment then, quite casually, he reached up with his right and gripped Phenix's left hand. Phenix tightened his hold in anticipation of a struggle but all he felt was the other's fingers gliding over his skin as though seeking something.

"I'll have that drink now," grunted Phenix triumphantly. For an answer Joe pressed hard with two of his fingers. A bright red rocket of agony soared up Phenix's arm

and exploded behind his forehead. When the flashes faded from his vision Joe was standing back out of reach adjusting his now slightly soiled collar.

"If you had any more money," Joe said, "I would charge you every penny of it. You don't deserve one of my Orange Delights." He stared at Phenix with open dislike in his ice blue eyes. "In fact," he said angrily, "I've a good mind to...."

Suddenly Phenix was alone, surrounded by sand and under the cloudless blue lens of the sky. Even the secretary bird had vanished and all that remained to prove that the incident had occurred at all was the ebb and flow of pain in his wrist and an oblong indentation in the sand.

Phenix stared blankly for a long time, thinking. This was a strange country - the nearly extinct Bushmen told many tales of things that had happened to men in the desert. The very spot where he was standing had once been the bed of the Orange River, wherein the Groot Slang, a myth and mystery shrouded monster had its home. Less than a hundred miles away was Bowesdorp, the lemming village, the inhabitants of which had, for no reason in particular, moved every stick and stone to a new site several miles away....

Yes Namqualand was strange country and one had to accept it - what else could one do? Phenix shifted the sack on his back and began to walk. He walked until he dropped and did it again and then once more, covering about three miles. The third time he could manage no more than a slight arching of the back when he tried to rise.

After three hours under the seemingly motionless sun Phenix realised that he had made a mistake. He should have bought the drink when he had the chance, no matter what the price. Providing that it had all really happened - recurring blackouts were making his thoughts misty and feeble.

Feeling the compelling urge to keep going Phenix dragged himself upright and tried to walk. The cracked Velskoens felt like concrete blocks encasing his feet. He was to near oblivion to do more than moan faintly when the still bright and still gaily painted soft drink stall reappeared.

Phenix fell the last three feet to the counter and leaned on it a moment, head on arms, thankful of the cool shade of the sun awning. When he felt he had enough strength he took off the haversack and swung it up beside him. He tried to speak but his tongue was too thick and dry to form the words.

"Changed your mind I see," said Joe, not unkindly.

Phenix nodded, noticing, irrelevantly, that Joe had changed his shirt. Joe took the haversack and set it carefully beneath the counter, then he drew a glass of grapefruit juice from a dispenser and pushed it over to Phenix. Phenix drank it and when it was finished, returned reluctantly to earth - it had been worth it. Gasping from the shock he pushed the empty glass back hopefully. He was still unable to speak.

"Tell you what I'll do," said Joe beaming at him in sudden friendliness, "I'll give you a little something by way of discount. You've really been a big help to me, you

know." He turned to one of the neatly lined shelves and gathered an armful of bottles, carried them to the counter and dropped them at Phenix's feet. One of them cracked open against another and the mineral water gurgled darkly onto the sand. Phenix dropped to his knees in an instinctive, belated attempt to stem the flow and was so intent on saving the precious fluid that he barely heard Joe's voice.

"Goodbye friend, and - thanks," it said, then Phenix was alone again with his little hoard of gleaming bottles.

Late that night he staggered into Pella and was lucky enough to get a lift to Kalkfontain from an elderly German couple who were touring. He had enough money of his own to take him to the anonymity of Port Elizabeth where he signed on to a cargo ship Southampton bound.

When he reached England he stayed there.

Jo Bron smiled as he watched Phenix snatch the broken mineral water bottle. He thought the thrusting thought coupled with the figure of two hours and the kneeling man disappeared. This was now the same part of the desert two hours before Phenix would reach it.

Jo Bron lifted the haversack of money by the strap and executed a little jig in the confined space of his little stall, then he sobered up - he was still an Improver Merchant and a certain standard of conduct is imposed on Improvers.

He knelt in front of the screen that was built into the plywood counter and thought the modified thrusting thought coupled with the code-image of the Master Merchant. When the familiar face appeared on the screen, blurred with power loss in speaking across two and a half thousand years, Jo Bron made the Merchants' signal. "Jo Bron, IM-2e373, reporting in. The final section of my qualifying test is complete. In five periods of time, not less than two centuries apart, I have earned a sum of local currency equal to one thousand standard credit units."

The Master Merchant looked mildly surprised.

"You were very quick Jo Bron," he said, "I hope you haven't infringed any of the regulations."

Jo permitted a faint trace of reproach to enter his voice.

"No sir. All monies I received were given to me with the full consent of the other party and in exchange for services or goods considered to be etc etc, and not in a manner outside the Sharp Practice specifications. I hereby claim the status and privileges of a qualified Merchant."

"Very well then," replied the Master Merchant, "return to normal time. Your place will be ready for you."

"Yes sir," snapped Jo Bron eagerly. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead, smoothed down his white linen jacket and thought the maximum thrusting thought.

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